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Temporal Belongings



Interview Series Number Four

Sally Rawlings
former Head, Big Local

Michelle Bastian
June 2014



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Sally Rawlings is an experienced community development worker, policy maker and strategic influencer specialising in rural communities and housing. She has formerly been the Chief Executive of Rural Action Yorkshire and most recently was the Head of Big Local for Local Trust. Currently she is working in Yorkshire setting up a new housing trust for Selby District. She is passionate about enabling communities to become resilient and self-reliant.

This interview took place in January 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Communities and time

MB: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Perhaps, just to begin, could you tell us a bit about the kind of work you do with communities?

SR: I've worked as a community development worker since leaving university. That's taken on different guises, whether on the policy side or the delivery side. I started off doing direct delivery work with people on the ground; it would be called community empowerment now. I was working with rural communities, and I did that for five years, before moving on to more specific development projects. For example, I worked for a housing association who were developing new properties, but who were always doing this work in consultation with the communities that they were going to be in, again mainly rural. Then I moved into policy work and that was about working with communities to influence policy, particularly economic policy in the Midlands where I was based. Now with Big Local I am doing a bit of both, through setting up the programme to help empower communities and residents, beyond the 'usual suspects,' to work together to spend £1 million over ten years in each of the Big Local areas; and using what's learned from that process to influence government and other policy.

MB: Thank you. And so, just in general, have you noticed any issues to do with time coming up in that work? Is it something that has raised its head, or has it been something more under the radar?

SR: It has definitely raised its head. It's certainly happening now with Big Local because each of the areas has ten years to spend their million pounds, and we have different outside bodies wanting them to spend it a lot quicker. In fact even Big Lottery Fund, who have given us the money to deliver the programme have been asking how much has been spent so far. We've been saying that it's not really about that, but for them they have to report the amount of spend every month to the government. And so they have been asking why we haven't spent this money more quickly, particularly in

comparison to the way organisations in receipt of grants usually spend their funding. But they also know that we do have fifteen years, so they've moved towards asking "Ok, well, when will you start getting worried?" And for me I think it won't be for another four years, because by that time I would need all of the 150 areas to have a plan on how to spend their money. Though to be honest, even four and a half years would be fine, but I'm giving myself some leeway.

MB: It's really interesting, isn't it, just how ingrained these ideas are of the correct pace for doing something, and how different uses of time can represent success and failure. So if things are going in a very linear and predictable way that seems successful. But if you are trying to look at things in a more complex way, where processes happen in fits and starts and can burble along before all of a sudden changing, then that just doesn't look right. You could look at it as a clash between different philosophies of time, each of which influence what looks like success and what doesn't in different ways.

SR: Yes, absolutely. When we were at the *Temporal Conflicts* workshop, I loved the way Ronnie Hughes from a *sense of place* described it. He talked about the clash between 'gardening time' and 'political time' and so on.¹ And yeah, the community have their own time and the programme gives them permission to have their own timeframe. But those who have different timeframes, usually those who don't understand the programme, don't like that, they really don't like that.

Communities as static?

MB: Well, and I wonder how it might play into the idea that communities are often seen as quite static and stuck in time? Some people have suggested that this idea has dominated government policies and helped to support the idea that communities are in need of intervention in order to help them be more dynamic. Have you noticed any of these sorts of issues coming up?

SR: Yes, but communities are never static. They grow and develop organically; again it's at their own pace. For those communities that are seen as static, sometimes it's about lifting the levels of aspiration in a community, because they might not know that they could do something, or that they had that kind of opportunity. If you know what you don't know you can do something about it, but I think there are some cases, especially those we're working with in Big Local, where people don't know what they don't know, and they also

¹ You can find out more about the *Temporal Conflicts* workshop here: <http://www.temporalbelongings.org/temporal-conflicts.html> You can also listen to Ronnie Hughes' talk here: <http://www.temporalbelongings.org/2/post/2012/11/ronnie-hughes-a-sense-of-place.html>

don't know that they can do anything about it. It sounds very Donald Rumsfeld, but I think when they realise what they're missing, they'll suddenly go, "Oh my god, we can do this, let's do it," and they will actually get on and do it, but again, at their own pace. Definitely, not at anybody else's pace.

MB: So have you noticed, perhaps in your policy work, that the assumption that communities are static has caused problems in the policy that was being developed, or the interventions that have subsequently been generated?

SR: Yes, some communities have been seen as obstructive because they wouldn't buy into the ideas that the policy makers have for them, but that's usually because of the poor communication between the policy makers and the individuals that make up the community. A classic example occurred in my own village, when the Local Planning Authority were consulting on the new local development plan for the whole of the valley. One particular field had been suggested for use as social housing, and immediately the people who lived in the older social housing next door were very resistant to this. I asked some of them why they were reacting this way, since we had a housing shortage, and there wasn't anywhere else for their kids to live. Nobody had communicated the benefits to them and so they just saw it as a threat.

MB: And so that stereotype of communities as static can be used to dismiss people, as simply being stuck in their ways, rather than needing to engage with the complexities of the community.

SR: Yes, absolutely. And to also try and trample all over them as a result.

Multiple times of community

MB: Yes, that's interesting. Well so following on from that, at the workshop you came along to and in a lot of the Temporal Belongings workshops, we've been interested in showing how there are multiple times, rhythms, and processes in communities. The idea that they're static seems to bring with it the assumption that they are also homogeneous in terms of time, that everyone has the same sense of history, the same imagination of their future, etc. So we were interested in pulling out the way that there might be multiple times in a community, which might conflict with each other, or might coalesce and be quite supportive and creative.

SR: Yes. We've found that with Big Local, though in a sense most of the conflicts have actually come about because of poor communication and lack of experience of collaboration between residents in the communities themselves, rather than an issue over time. The main discrepancies we've had are those residents that just

want to get on and do the activities, and those that get bogged down in the process of governing, and focusing on how the governance for the funding works. So there you've got conflicts between different kinds of time, and we just sorted that out by suggesting to them that they actually split the two groups up, and the people who want to do the activities get on and do the activities, and feed back to the people who want to do the process, and vice versa. As long as the two sides communicate and agree a plan to do it, and don't burden the plan with lots of bureaucracy and rules, then that suits both the activists and the bureaucrats amongst the residents. And that's starting to work well now.

MB: And so in a way you have the different rhythms finding a way of working together, but without them needed to synchronise with each other. I imagine it could be quite beneficial to have activities going on during the planning stage, since they could actually feed into the plan and perhaps also provide some early examples of proof of concept?

SR: Yes, absolutely. We have an overall theory of change for the programme, though we don't use that language with our communities. We'll have failed if we start using 'theory of change' with them; their plan is their theory of change, which itself contributes to achieving the programme-wide theory of change. Yes, how do you know that residents are really in control of this process and governing the bureaucratic processes?

So it's a bit of proof of concept, but it's also about them taking the process and making it theirs and taking responsibility. So yes, we've given them three or four guidelines, and then they can do whatever they like within those guidelines. For example, the projects need to be resident-led (i.e. a majority of residents on the partnership), the organisation set up to manage the funds has to be legal, and the funds need to be spent within the ten years.

Time and project management

MB: So it's quite different then from the normal time of a project. In this interview series we've talked to a few people who are working with Big Local, and the way it seems to differ from the standard PRINCE 2 model of project management has come up a few times. It seems like the programme is a deliberate attempt to experiment with the 'proper time' of the project.

SR: Perhaps, but actually you could apply PRINCE 2 to this, provided that you have the 10+ years as your project timeframe and provided that the jargonistic terminology, which is very PRINCE 2, wasn't used. Then, yes, I think it would work.

MB: Oh, because one of the assumptions that seems to be built into PRINCE2 is that you'll start out with a

very clear project plan, and you'll assume you know what's going to happen before you start. The Big Local programme seems to have a much more open future.

SR: It is open, but once the communities have their vision, that is effectively their project initiation document, and then the plan is the detail on that document.

MB: Perhaps then, one of the key differences is that the programme has significantly extended the project initiation time for as long as people need?

SR: Yes, so until they have their plan, that's all effectively 'year zero'. It's all project initiation time. Basically, we're saying that actually you've got as much time as you like. Well – four years – to get that far in the process.

MB: Which is so much longer than normal isn't it?

SR: Oh absolutely. And having a year zero is okay, having two year zeros is a lot better, and three is even better still. The challenge is not to lose momentum, so you have lots of mini projects to keep momentum going, whilst you're getting to that plan stage.

MB: And would you say that the groups involved are aware of the need to cater to the different rhythms of the various people involved? Even in the project initiation stage, for example, some people might only be around for a year or two and others might be around for longer. So although you've got that four year timescale, there's still going to be a turnover of people in the meantime?

SR: There is, and they're aware of that, mainly because they know their communities. To be honest, that's absolutely fine. And in general they know who they haven't got involved yet, and who they still need to approach. There were a few Big Local areas where the residents were only involving one segment of their community and we're exploring that with them, particularly why they didn't see these other people as part of their community, even though they actually live there. We're testing those kinds of things and challenging them to explore some of their preconceptions, but we won't challenge them on the timeframe of their initiation processes until we get to that four and a half year stage. We'd then have to say to them, "You need your plan, because there is another ten years for Big Local Trust to run, and that means there's only ten years for you guys to run with your Big Local funding."

Past and futures

MB: Great. Thanks. Moving on to the next question, again in contrast to a static model of communities, I wanted to ask you about the role of the past and future

in community work. I know you've been involved in regeneration projects, and in Big Local the idea of a shared future seems quite important, but perhaps if we focus on the past first? Have you come across examples where there were problems on a project because the past wasn't acknowledged adequately? For example by assuming that everyone has the same shared past, or the past being ignored altogether when an intervention was planned?

SR: Okay. Well in Big Local we don't ignore the past. We ask each area to come up with a local profile and that usually includes their past as well. I'd be very surprised if it didn't, and if one does come in without any history to it, then we encourage them to explore what happened in their area two years ago, ten years ago, thirty years ago, a hundred years ago. We had some great stories from that. Some are of a shared past, but also some memories and stories are recognised as not being shared because people have moved around, and come in, and gone away, and come back again. So it is fragmented, but that's absolutely fine.

MB: And what about in some of the policy work you were doing prior to this?

SR: Yes, certainly when I working in economic policy and coming up with an economic assessment for Coventry and Warwickshire, we did do a historical profile of the area and explored what had shaped it. We didn't go back into the geological past, though, which is a bit of a shame because that actually makes a difference. For example, when I was doing my secondment to the Countryside Agency we were linking landscape and people and this was important because by focusing on that you can start to understand whether there's a heft there between the people and their landscape or not. And it varied, depending on the remoteness of the community; the more remote the community, the more hefted they were, and tightly connected to their landscape. They would understand their weather and what that meant for them and for everything else. So the more remote a community, the more they understand their landscape, where they come from, and how that worked.

MB: And then so the timescale for that kind of community wouldn't just be a human timescale, but would take in a much wider scope?

SR: Absolutely, yes. They understood where their water came from originally, and how all of that worked. They understood the weather patterns. There was one guy in our village who could tell you, before the Met

Office could, how much snow we were going to have that day. That is quite scary, but he's 90 and he's lived there all his life, and still doesn't have any electricity in his house.

MB: Well, I imagine you would pay more attention to things when you don't have the kinds of technologies that insulate you from the elements.

SR: Absolutely.

MB: So do you think attending to that sense of geological time would be useful for working with other communities, or do you think it is just specific to remote communities?

SR: I think it could be. It partly depends where you are. But understanding the geology of a place helps you to understand how important the great rivers are to the way the country works, and the economy works, and why particular settlements are where they are, and why these places are the way they are. That kind of thing is really important. But I think that sometimes that is felt a lot more on the coast than it is inland. It's the coastal towns and villages feel that connection to place a lot more, even though they're less remote than some inland areas, because the sea shapes what they do and why they do it.

MB: And perhaps issues to do with climate change might be much more pressing for them too, than it might be for others.

SR: Absolutely, yes and we've seen that, especially with some of the Big Local areas on the east coast. Cliff erosion and things like that are starting to become an issue.

Times of crisis

MB: Well, because there's some interesting work I've been reading about the way we idealise the community where people are well-networked and support each other, but this feeling of 'community' often occurs most clearly where there has been a disruption of some kind to the everyday flow of time – a disaster or an emergency. This means that the strong sense of connection that accompanies this type of experience only lasts for finite periods of time and eventually dissipates...

SR: Or do they dissipate? That's a good question because again, with the snow this week,² we've had Big Local areas using Twitter to remind people to go and see their neighbours e.g. "If you're snowed in at home and not working, why don't you just pop in and see your neighbour?" And people have been doing that. So

there is an increase in neighbourliness because there is a period of adversity for – whatever it is – up to a week and so people will support each other. But one of the things that some Big Local areas have found is that by introducing neighbours to each other, residents have a greater sense of security in their place. The fear of crime goes down because people actually know who's around them. So maybe there will be one thing that brings a neighbourhood together for a short space of time, whether it's a flood, or a fire, or snow, or whatever it is, but actually it triggers something that carries on. It's certainly something that I would be interested in measuring, whether there's been an increase in neighbourliness across our Big Local areas and where the biggest change came, whether it was early on in the programme or later on and whether it was maintained, and all those sorts of questions.

MB: Yes, I suppose that fact of having better networks is not always something you can see unless there is a time of crisis, which, in a way, comes back again to this idea of success and how you can tell if something is successful. If you're assuming that it's something that should be apparent at all times, then maybe you will fail to see some of the more implicit networking effects that a particular set of activities have produced.

SR: Exactly, because you don't recognise success when it's part of what everybody does.

MB: And then you can't really test that can you?

SR: You can't. Although I have a social capital toolkit I want to test out. There's a possibility we can do that as part of a different project, but incorporating Big Local areas into that.

MB: That's really interesting, because when you're working with communities, you are therefore working in environments that are complex and dynamic. And so I wondered about traditional indicators of success that seemed to turn everything into statistics and numbers. It seemed there was a risk of taking away the flow and the process of the work itself. It sounds as if you are trying to develop different approaches?

SR: Yes, we're trying to think of different ways of doing it, and, and the outcomes that we're going to be measuring, if you can ever measure an outcome, are around the question of whether people feel that their area is an even better place to live, and how do we test that out? One of the questions we might be asking is whether they would recommend their place to their relatives and friends to come and live; and test that question now, and test that question throughout the ten years. So that's one, then there's also a focus on health and wellbeing which we might test out using some of the government's happiness indicators. We

² In late January 2013 the UK experienced unusually cold weather with heavy snowfalls, airport closures, travel disruptions and power outages.

could test that out in Big Local areas and see whether time makes a difference to that. Although we do know too that there is the larger question of how you know whether you've had an impact, and the change is directly attributable to the Big Local project, or whether a change is related to other factors.

Communicating non-linear times

MB: So, in doing this work have you found it important to challenge particular kinds of linear models? I'm wondering because philosophical issues like this can seem so abstract, but it seems like you've been developing ways of challenging the dominance of linear models of time?

SR: Absolutely. The dominance of those models is one of the things that has worried me actually. For example, the pathway through the process that we use with Big Local communities is portrayed as linear. But actually it's not; there are various parts of the pathway that should be repeated all the way through. Engaging people is one example, because people move on and change. Another example is checking the group's progress, because you shouldn't just do this at the end of the ten years. And so we've been trying to depict that non-linearity pictorially, in a way that is simple rather than confusing, and we haven't come up with it yet. The nearest I got to it was a labyrinth. The trouble is that most people's perception of a labyrinth is that it's something confusing and scary; whereas, actually, if you look at the proper definition of a labyrinth, it's none of those things. It's more like being *en route* to a destination, and while you might not know exactly what that destination is, you're still on a journey, and you will get to your destination eventually and so achieve success. But that hasn't worked either, so we've got to go back to the drawing board.

MB: I wonder if that relates to the question about pasts and futures, in that in order to create a useful diagram of this process you may need to work with the kinds of things that already make sense to people. If you want to use processes that are quite different, people might not always have the memories or the resources that they could useful draw on to understand what is being suggested to them in the present.

SR: That's right.

MB: It's one of the things that came up in my interview with Alison Gilchrist, in regard to the Transition

Network trying to make use of 'pattern language', which is a non-linear way of providing information about best practice.³ You might look at one 'pattern' that you are interested in – awareness raising, for example – and you could find links to related patterns such as 'inclusion and diversity,' or 'respectful communication.' So rather than a progressive set of steps, you have 'ingredients' that you can combine in different ways. But when Rob Hopkins first started using this model people did find it very difficult. This seems to be a particular problem given that while there's this shift to thinking about things in a more complex, systems based way, it is still very difficult to find the language.

SR: Yes, it is difficult to do that without resorting to using jargon and being too academic. Someone I used to work with very closely at Bradford Council was a systems guy. He oversaw and co-ordinated the sustainability work that the council was doing as an organisation and also for the district, and he was very much into systems and the way all that worked. I always had to ask him to explain things again, because he just seemed to be using another language. When your ear is not attuned to the jargon, it's really hard. So a part of me thinks why should our residents have to get their ears tuned into any jargon? Why couldn't they explain it in their own language? So there's definitely some more work to do on that.

MB: It's really interesting, because I suppose there is an assumption that we are dominated by a Western linear time, but actually there's lots of ways that we talk about time as being non-linear. It's very normal to talk about cycles, economic cycles for example, and so perhaps there's lots of 'ordinary language' ways of talking about different kinds of time, beyond linear time.

SR: Absolutely.

MB: So maybe part of resolving this dilemma would be to look for ways that systems theory might have already been incorporated into everyday language...but still it can all be a lot of work, do you think it's worth it?

SR: I do, because I think the linearity of time comes from the fact that we're born and then at some stage we die and we can't go back. You can't be 25 again or 40 again, or whatever. Your age will keep in sequence, in a linear trajectory. That's why the concept of cycles and multi-dimensions and so on is quite hard for some people; and some people just do have a linear way of thinking. I must admit, I am one of those people. It's quite hard to break out of that mould and work out what systems people are talking about. So I have every sympathy with the residents in our groups who are trying to get a sense of "when do we get to the end of this?" Actually we won't get to the end of it for ten years, and that's the linearity of the scheme. But on the

³ See *Temporal Belongings Interview Series* No. 3, p 7.

other hand, there's all sorts of things communities are going to do in between times, they are going to repeat things and that's absolutely fine even though people will still be asking "well, why do we have to repeat it, because won't that mean we've failed?"

MB: That's fascinating because it brings us back to the question of how concepts of time shape what looks like success and what looks like failure. I remember a great comment from someone at an AHRC Connected Communities meeting where people were worried about being stuck in the same old problems, 'reinventing the wheel' and so on.⁴ Her response was to say "if it's a good wheel it should turn." I wonder about the seemingly automatic resistance to repetition. At a workshop I was at this weekend, we were talking about the idea of maintenance work which comes up a lot in feminist theory, the repetitive work that is what allows life to continue – cooking, cleaning, growing and everything else like this.

SR: Yes, absolutely. You have to change the light bulb every so often, so why not when you're doing stuff like Big Local? Maybe I need to use that analogy next time I have to have a discussion with a community group about this.

Time and power

MB: Yes, and the gendered dimension is important as well. Some feminist theorists have associated linear time with masculinity and cyclical time with women, and while it is of course important to ask whether that is actually the case, it does seem that one is much more valued than the other. Those kinds of relationships between time and social judgements about value were something we were also really interested in exploring. For example, the idea that time is not an objective, numerical, linear flow, but supports some ways of life over others. Looked at this way it is easier to see how time is bound up with power.

SR: Absolutely. Something we've seen in Big Local areas are various power plays between some of the residents and time, which has been very interesting. A particular group can have more power because they get to choose the time of meetings. You might know who can make particular times of day, and who can't, and if you want your friends to be there you'll schedule the meeting to suit you and your friends and not necessarily the wider community. We've had that play out quite a lot. So that's very interesting and we do challenge that: Why are all your meetings at two o'clock in the afternoon on a Wednesday? Why are you not

moving the meeting times and dates around? There's an element of us being creatures of habit and therefore liking a routine, such as always meeting on the third Thursday of the month, but then that will mean that you end up only having people around you who support you, but don't challenge you. And that is not actually what makes a good programme.

MB: And in making that kind of decision about the timing of a meeting, it could look like you are just being practical or pragmatic, because that's simply when everyone could come to the meeting. The politics inherent to the decision, i.e. that you might be removing the possibility of dissent, gets hidden because we don't always see time as related to power, but just as a pragmatic tool for organising things.

SR: Absolutely.

MB: Ok, so I have one last question here that is about challenging and transforming dominant approaches to time. We've talked a fair bit about this already, in relation to linear time and systems time, around the benefits and drawbacks of trying to change the underlying philosophy of time that guides community development work. But I wondered if you had anything more you wanted to say about that, particularly about the difficulties of doing this when attempts to do time differently can often be interpreted as a failure to understand social norms, rather than a challenge to the norms themselves?

SR: Yes, so I think what we try to do is give the residents of each of the Big Local areas the space and the support to try and do some of that exploration; and to say that just because something didn't work in a particular timeframe doesn't mean that it might not work in a different one. That's where we come back again to idea that there is no such thing as failure when it comes to the residents' part of the programme, because it's about them learning and testing the boundaries and if that's the timing boundaries, that's fine.

MB: Well even questioning that idea that if something didn't work in the past, then it won't work now, further challenges the idea that time consists of blank units that are somehow equivalent and interchangeable with each other. That the present moment is the same as the past moment when an approach failed, rather than seeing each moment as shaped by the different forces and rhythms that are specific to it.

SR: Yes, because when some of the residents say, "Oh well, that didn't work when it was done ten years ago," we will then challenge them on this. "Okay what are the particular circumstances, why do you think it didn't work, what would you do differently next time?"

⁴ The AHRC Connected Communities programme has previously funded the Temporal Belongings project. Its focus is on connecting research with communities, with a particular emphasis on developing co-designed projects. For more info see <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Connected-Communities/>

And if they say there won't be a next time, we're going to say, "Well why not? Why not take some time to test it out again now. You've got a different set of people, change the parameters you think were the wrong ones from last time and give it another go." But if they've tested ideas out and come to the conclusion then it really wouldn't work, that's fine, because something has been learned, but also people are aware that they can revisit and try things out again.

MB: Yeah, I really like the idea of having 'safe-fail' test runs, rather than aiming for fail-safe projects. This idea was suggested in a great book called *Getting to Maybe: how the world is changed*, as a way for those working in policy, as well as funders, to bring elements of systems thinking into their approaches.⁵ Speaking of funders, there's been a fair bit of discussion in this interview series about the mismatches between 'funding time' and 'community time' and so I wondered how you justify the model of time that you are using to the Big Lottery Fund?

SR: We're lucky that we don't have to do that because we're an endowed trust. They've given us the money, so that in their eyes it's spent. In a sense they can't take it back, so there's no issue. Though on the other hand, they do still have an influence and we do need to remind them that you shouldn't measure your success only by the speed of your spend. They can get worried about any under-spend because they know they'll be challenged by the politicians, which is where you end up having 'political time' dictating what should happen in terms of 'community time'; and that's where it all goes pear-shaped.

MB: But I suppose with Big Local, if you're endowed, there are structures in place that allow a separation between those times, 'political time' and 'community time.'

SR: Yes, having an endowed trust provides that separation, which makes our lives a lot easier.

MB: So just to wrap up, do you think there is potential for your approach to be taken up more broadly within community development?

SR: Well our approach has been done on a small scale before. It's happening all over the country in individual communities, certainly in the rural ones, because this has been the way rural community councils have worked since the year dot. It just hasn't made it into government consciousness in quite the way that Big Local might. So we can bring all of that experience together to actually have some sort of influence. Whether government will go with it, I don't know. This approach to time can be a problem when for

governments on five year cycles, who want to prove that they are the one who made the difference. I don't know. For some reason our politicians don't see themselves as custodians for the future and until they do, I think we will be trapped in a five year cycle of doing stuff, sadly.

MB: Ok, let's end things there. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me today.

⁵ Westley, F., B. Zimmerman & M. Quinn Patton (2007) *Getting to maybe: how the world is changed*. Vintage: Toronto, p183.

Temporal Belongings

The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: www.temporalbelongings.org

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